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The Bible and African-American Culture

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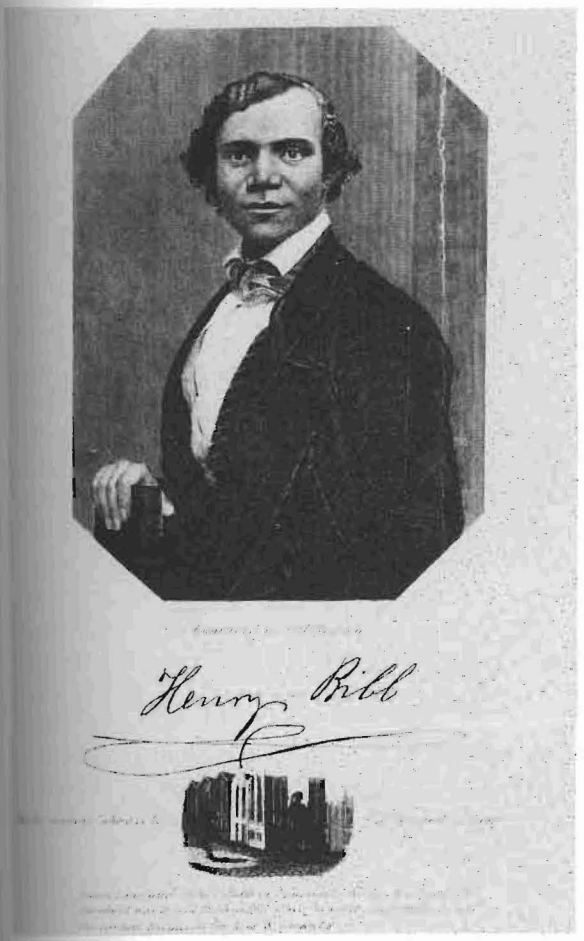

The emigration of almost fifty thousand blacks in the antebellum period created many opportunities for developing self-governing community institutions. One of the most zealous advocates of black autonomy was Henry Walton Bibb, editor of *Voice of the Fugitive*. Like many Canadian blacks of the time, Bibb was an escaped slave; this poster offers a reward for his return to Kentucky. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

second wife, Mary Miles Bibb of Boston, to CANADA. In Ontario, the Bibbs soon became leaders of the large African-Canadian community.

In 1851, Bibb established the *Voice of the Fugitive*, the first black newspaper in Canada. Through the *Voice*, he expressed his essential ideas as an emigrationist by urging slaves and free blacks to move to Canada. The newspaper became a central tool of emigration advocates. In addition to the *voice*, Bibb's civic and political accomplishments in the Ontario communities were substantial.

Two years before his death, and as a direct result of his work as a writer and orator, Bibb was reunited with three of his brothers, who had escaped from bondage and emigrated to Canada. He interviewed them and published their stories in the *Voice of the Fugitive*. Bibb died in the summer of 1854, at the age of thirty-nine.

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Bible and African-American Culture, The.

The history of the influence, uses, and functions of the Bible among African Americans is dramatic and complex, and reflects the different, sometimes conflicting, sociopolitical and religious self-understandings, orientations, and aspirations of a dominant segment, if not the great majority, of African Americans.

The earliest large-scale cultural encounter with the Bible can be traced to the late eighteenth century, as evidenced by the formation of independent African-American congregations in the North and South, both visible and "invisible," and in different cultural interpretive expressions, such as slave songs, poetry, sermons, and journals. Finding themselves enslaved by those who seemed to find in the Bible a source of power and knowledge, Africans in the New World embraced the Bible for themselves as a source of psychic-spiritual emotional power and hope, as inspiration for learning, and as a language of veiled criticism.

The dramatic narratives of the Hebrew Bible, especially the Exodus story and the moral and sociopolitical excoriations of the prophets, the display of the thaumaturgical powers of Jesus, and his pathos and ultimate vindication in the New Testament, captured the collective popular imagination of enslaved Africans from the beginning of their encounter with the Bible.

Thus, in the initial hearings and adoption of the stories of the Bible, African Americans essentially transformed the Bible from the Book of Slaveholders and of Slaveholding Religion into the Book of the World and Religion of Slaves. It was thereby engaged as a window onto another world, a language world full of personalities and drama with which the slaves could identify, notwithstanding the historical and spatial gulf which the hearing and the reading made obvious. It was precisely the hearing and reading of dramatic biblical stories about times and exploits long ago in faraway lands that seemed most arresting: Such engagement provided not only occasional psychic respite from the harshness of slavery, but also a powerful rhetorical and conceptual reper-

toire for resistance, and positive constructions of the African-American religious self.

The Bible continued to serve multiple functions among African Americans through the end of the period of slavery and the decades of Reconstruction and Jim Crowism and into the civil rights movements of the 1950s and '60s. But a dominant pattern of reading can be discerned during the period. From the founding of the independent black churches and denominations in the late eighteenth century to the clamor against segregation in the mid-twentieth century, a great number of African Americans saw in the Bible the language and concepts of social and prophetic critique, the blueprint for racial uplift, social integration, political peace, and economic equality. A few leaders (Alexander Waters, Martin R. DELANY, Edward W. BLYDEN, among others) advanced more radical pan-Africanist views, citing biblical injunctions for black separatism, including a back-to-Africa program (*see* PAN-AFRICANISM). But for the majority, including nineteenth-century mainline learned and not-so-learned clergy and their communities and twentieth-century educators and politicians, the Bible was the primary blueprint for a type of social reform. The biblical principle of the universal kinship of all humanity under the sovereignty of God was embraced by the majority of African Americans as a mandate for social integration and political equality, and as a critique of the America that claimed to be God-fearing. New Testament passages illustrative of the principle (Gal. 3:26–128; Acts 2, 10:34–36) were often quoted, paraphrased, or alluded to in orations, sermons, and tracts.

In this dominant African-American reading, the Bible continues to be primary in terms of the construction of the religious self. And it also continues to provide a language of critique. But the critique is not radical. This reading, of both the Bible and American culture, is canonical. It more or less respects both the dominant traditional white Protestant parameters of principles of interpretation, as well as the range of texts considered worthy of consideration. Biblical images and teachings provided the impetus and ideological foundations for the founding of separate African-American churches and educational and other institutions. But these separate institutions do not represent comprehensive alternative pedagogies, philosophies, or politics. They represent both accommodationist and integrationist interests and limited, racialist social critique. And both responses are supported by biblical example and injunction.

The growth and dominance of the religion-inspired separate but accommodationist African-American institutions and ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries notwithstanding, they could not and did not embrace, or reflect the sensibilities of, every individual or community. A very different reading of the Bible among African Africans is in evidence by the early decades of the twentieth century in major urban areas in the United States. This reading is critical of both the dominant white American culture and its secular and religious aspects and the dominant African-American religious and cultural orientations.

No single unified group can be identified here; there are a number of groups—the Garvey Movement (*see* Marcus GARVEY; UNIVERSAL NEGRO IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION), the NATION OF ISLAM, FATHER DIVINE and the Peace Mission Movement, Black Jews (*see* JUDAISM), the SPIRITUAL CHURCH MOVEMENT, and other so-called sects and cults—without formal ties, but with shared sensibilities and rhythms, and a shared critique of the dominant world and the African-American mainline churches.

The critique is registered in different ways by different groups. One of the most dramatic is in the reading of the Bible that is accepted as Holy Scripture by most whites and African Americans, but through hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) not legitimized by these communities (such as spiritual churches). It is also registered through rejection of the canon respected by mainline communities and the embracing of esoteric sacred texts (such as those embraced by Black Jews).

In addition, the readings of women are in evidence throughout the history of African-American engagement with the Bible—from Phillis WHEATLEY to Maria STEWART and Jarena LEE and their countless unnamed counterparts to late twentieth-century critical womanist interpreters. Although women's readings of the Bible are a constitutive part of each cultural reading outlined above, women's readings bring special nuances or intensity, especially regarding the articulation of exclusion and suffering or their opposites, inclusion and joy.

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